

English in the Japanese Linguistic Landscape

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Japan's long history of contact with the English language has had an immense impact on its society. This is most visible in the Japanese linguistic landscape, where English appears throughout society in public places such as shop signs, road markings, advertising billboards, and product packaging. This article explores some of the main ways in which English is used in the Japanese linguistic landscape.

English is Everywhere in Japan

When I first set foot in Tokyo 17 years ago, I was straightaway intrigued by the amount and variety of English that surrounded me on things like shop signs, advertising billboards, road markings, and product packaging. At first, I considered that this extensive and creative use of English was because Tokyo is a global mega-city, with worldwide brands advertising and selling their goods through the medium of English. However, as I stayed longer in the country and travelled around the smaller towns and villages, I noticed that even local Japanese-based businesses were advertising products such as rice, farm machinery, and day-trip bus-tours with adverts written in English. Why?

As I became more interested in the English written in the public places around me, I started to read about the history of English in Japan. I learnt that the influence of English on Japanese society stretches back over four hundred years to the arrival of the sailor William Adams in the early 17th century, one of the country's first resident English-language speakers. I discovered that from those beginnings, through the period of Japan's rapid modernisation at the end of the 19th century and during its occupation by American forces at the end of the Second World War, the importance of English in Japan has grown steadily. Most importantly, I learnt that for much of this history English has been considered a fresh, modern, and fashionable language. In its earlier history, English was embraced in Japan as the language of industrialisation and modernisation, but now English in Japan is the language of globalisation; the language of much-loved foreign cultural items such as The Beatles, Harry Potter, anything Disney-related, and Nike.

Japan's Linguistic Landscape

Going deeper into the academic literature on English in Japanese society, I learnt that the investigation of language on signs in a society's public spaces has become a field of linguistic analysis in its own right: Linguistic Landscape studies. Within this field, attention is given not only to the question of *why* certain languages are used, but more interestingly to the question of *how* they are used.

Looking at how languages are used in the Japanese linguistic landscape, the long history of Japan's borrowing of words from languages such as Chinese, Dutch, German, and French means that English is not the only foreign language appearing in Japan's linguistic landscape. Rather, the Japanese linguistic landscape is a vibrant, multilingual melting pot of native words and a large variety of foreign borrowings. Making it even more dynamic is the fact that there are four main scripts which can be used to write the words: *kanji* (Chinese characters), *hiragana* and *katakana* (phonetic scripts derived from *kanji*), and *romaji* (Latin alphabet). When English is used, it appears regularly not only in the Latin alphabet but also in the Japanese script of *katakana*, a script primarily used for writing loanwords.

How is English used in the Japanese Linguistic Landscape?

The use of English in the Japanese linguistic landscape can be broadly categorised into three types: translations, loanwords, and foreignisms. Figure 1 shows English being used to translate Japanese text on a sign in the window of a supermarket to inform customers that solicitation (e.g. handing out leaflets, conducting questionnaires etc.) is prohibited in and around the supermarket. Because the Japanese text uses the infrequent, technical word 勧誘 (*kanyuu*) to explain the act of solicitation, a word which may be unknown to some Japanese people, the less-technical English loanword ストーカー (*stalker*) is also used in order to make the intended meaning of the sign clearer. The Japanese text is then translated into English and Chinese.

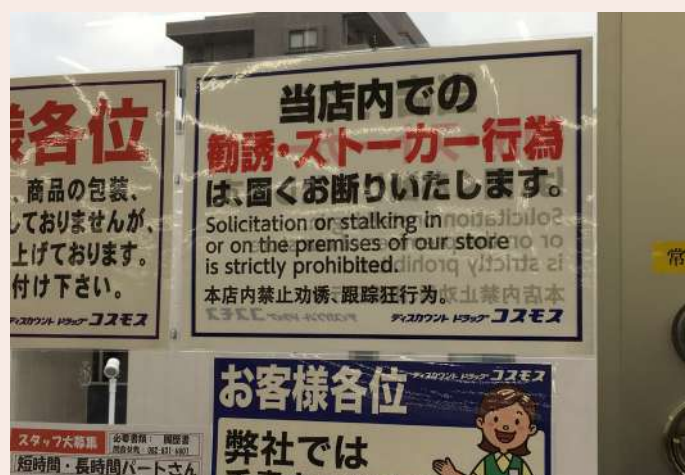


Figure 1. The use of English to translate Japanese text on a supermarket sign.

Figure 2 shows English again being used to translate Japanese text, but in this case it is an example of the frequent occurrence of signs or posters with English translations that have not been checked for accuracy in their grammar, vocabulary choice, and spelling. These kinds of errors with English usage in the Japanese linguistic landscape are so frequent that they make up a large percentage of the hundreds of examples of funny English usage from around the world that have been submitted to the website www.english.com.



Figure 2. The use of English to translate Japanese text on a sign in a public park.

Figure 3 contains examples of the many English loanwords which have been integrated into the Japanese language. This integration commonly involves changing their phonology (i.e. sounds), and morphology/syntax (i.e. grammar), to fit the rules of the Japanese language. They function as regular vocabulary items in Japanese communication and are typically written in the linguistic landscape in *katakana*. This picture is of a table sign with the top row of text showing the English loanword phrase イートインコーナー (*iitoinkoonaa*), meaning eat-in-corner, or a space within a building where food and drink are allowed to be consumed. The word *koonaa* (corner) is used again lower down on the sign and integrated into the phrase こちらのコーナーでの飲酒 喫煙はご遠慮ください, translated as 'please refrain from smoking and drinking alcohol in this corner area'. The use of English in this way shows how deeply integrated it is into the core of the Japanese language.



Figure 3. English written in katakana script on a table sign in a Japanese supermarket.

Figure 4 is an example of English foreignisms. Foreignisms are similar to loanwords but their function is more stylistic, to decorate the linguistic landscape and attract the attention of both Japanese and non-Japanese audiences. For this reason, they are written sometimes in the Latin alphabet, sometimes in *katakana* script, and sometimes in both. Often when English is used in this way there is little or no attention paid to the accuracy of the meaning. A common practice seems to be the copying and pasting and then mixing and matching of phrases from the Internet, which is probably the only way that the confusing combination of English in Figure 4 can be explained.



Figure 4. A sign welcoming customers to a clothes shop in Japan.

A Treasure Trove of Research Possibilities

The wealth of creative uses of English throughout the Japanese linguistic landscape presents an almost endless array of research possibilities, leading to many interesting questions around the use of English in Japanese society such as exactly what English is used, who writes it, who it is written for, where it is written, and in what styles and forms is it written? Looking into the latter question of the styles and forms of English in Japan, my current research examines how English loanwords have been integrated into the grammatical structure of the Japanese language.